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USDA/FAS FOR YVETTE WEDDERBURN, OCRA, RACHEL BICKFORD, OSTA

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SUBJECT: NICARAGUA: FY 2008 BIOTECHNOLOGY OUTREACH PROPOSAL

REF: 07 STATE 160639

11. (U) In response to reftel, Embassy Managua submits the following proposal for FY2008 Biotechnology Outreach Funding.

Purpose

12. (U) The purpose of our proposal is to promote the benefits of biotechnology and biofuels technologies to Nicaraguan decision makers, academics, and agricultural producers.

13. (U) Justification: Biotechnology and biofuel technologies are important to economic development in the new century. A number of Latin American countries have come to appreciate the inherent capacity of biotechnology and biofuel technologies to solve chronic problems related to agricultural and industrial development and energy supply. Such technologies offer a wide range of opportunities related to the practical application of science and improvement in national competitiveness.

14. (U) Nicaragua is a latecomer to promoting the use of science as a tool for economic development, yet scientific research is emerging as an integral component of the modern Nicaraguan university. New research laboratories have been established, such as the Molecular Biology Center at the University of Central America, and the Biotechnology Analysis laboratory at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Nicaragua. In 2007, the latter launched the country's first academic course on biotechnology. Nevertheless, Nicaraguan awareness of the benefits of biotechnology and biofuel technologies largely lags behind the rest of the region.

15. (U) We believe that there exists an excellent opportunity to promote the benefits of these technologies in Nicaragua and want to take advantage of the fact that the Department of State has identified Nicaragua as a "high priority country" for biotechnology and biofuels. We propose three activities that address policy concerns and present commercial applications for biotechnology and biofuels. They include a National Conference on Biotechnology, Outreach to Agricultural Universities and Institutions, and a Biofuel Energy Solutions Seminar.

Proposed Activities

16. (U) NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BIOTECHNOLOGY: Post proposes to sponsor a 2008 National Conference on Biotechnology that we propose to entitle, "The Future of Biotechnology: A Promising Story." The conference would bring together governmental, private sector, academic, and non-profit stakeholders who have an interest in the field of biotechnology. Our goal is to bring government decision makers, university academics and scientists, and agricultural producers together so that they may discuss the advantages of and opportunities generated by agricultural biotechnology. We want to help them take a science-based approach when formulating law,

regulations, and biotechnology policy and avoid political pitfalls created by anti-biotechnology myths and propaganda.

¶7. (U) We would invite speakers from the U.S. academic community and government, knowledgeable regional experts and academic researchers, including members of Nicaragua's Commission for Risk Analysis of Genetically Modified Organisms, and biotechnology experts from the Molecular Biology Center for the University of Central America and the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua. The event would be open to the press so as to contribute to general public awareness on the subject and encourage journalists to objectively report on biotechnology in the future.

¶8. (U) The event should be hosted by a willing institution with a vested interest in biotechnology, such as the Interamerican Institute for Cooperation for Agriculture (IICA), based in Managua. IICA has been looking to sponsor events such as the one we propose, and has a vested interest in encouraging the objective and science-based presentation of the facts on biotechnology, as well as the stature to attract the high-level of interest and participation that we seek.

¶9. (U) OUTREACH TO AGRICULTURAL UNIVERSITIES AND INSTITUTIONS: Post sees the great need to conduct outreach on biotechnology to agricultural universities, cooperatives, and associations where individuals may benefit the most from biotechnology, but are vulnerable to misinformation. In collaboration with USDA and USAID, we propose that we organize visits to five regional agricultural universities to address the potential benefits of biotechnology, as well as environmental and food safety issues. Invited participants would include university students and academics, members from local agricultural cooperatives and associations, as well as regional representatives engaged in agro-industry. Speakers and/or panel members may include members from these groups, but would be led by Spanish-speaking U.S. or regional experts on the subject that we recruit. Experts should be able to discuss the science behind biotechnology and address safety and ethical issues that people have. They should also be able to provide concrete examples of how biotechnology improves crop production and benefits the environment.

¶10. (U) BIOFUEL ENERGY SOLUTIONS SEMINAR: We believe there exists an excellent opportunity to promote the development of a biofuels industry in Nicaragua at this time. The country is heavily dependent on imported oil and finding cheaper sources of energy is a top priority for the government. While President Ortega has criticized the production of ethanol from corn, he has quietly supported private sector efforts to produce ethanol from sugar cane. The fact is that Nicaragua's soil and climate are ideally suited to the cultivation of potential sources of biofuels, such as sugar cane, African palm, and grasses. We want to advance the national dialogue on the development of a biofuels industry in Nicaragua.

¶11. (U) To accomplish this, we propose a day-long seminar to educate government officials on biofuel technologies, opportunities for the production of biofuels in Nicaragua, and the legal and regulatory framework necessary to support the development of a biofuels industry. Specific topics for discussion would include advances in cellulosic technology in light of Brazilian and other breakthroughs, overcoming challenges related to the consumption of biofuels, producing biofuels for export versus local consumption, the environmental impact of biofuel production (and consumption), food versus biofuel production, and biomass as a cost-effective source of energy.

¶12. (U) Potential speakers for these seminars include U.S. government officials, U.S. industry representatives, local managers of ethanol plants, U.S. academics such as George Philippidis from Florida International University's Applied Research Center, and an expert on the environmental consequences of biofuel production (and consumption), as well as private and public sector officials who are involved in biofuel production in Nicaragua and/or the region.

¶13. (U) Participants would include members of the National Assembly's Energy Committee, officials from the Ministries of Energy, Trade, and Environment, biofuel producers, business leaders, university researchers and academics from agricultural and engineering universities, and scientists from the Interamerican

Institute of Cooperation for Agriculture (the institution in charge of developing a regulatory framework for the production of biofuels in Nicaragua).

Target Audiences

¶14. (U) Each activity targets a different audience. The National Biotechnology Conference targets government officials, including members of the National Assembly's Committee on Health and other policy makers, and seeks their interaction with academics and industrial representatives. Outreach to agricultural universities and institutions targets agricultural producers and university academics and students who live in agricultural regions. The Biofuels Solutions Seminar will put government officials, scientists, and industry representatives together in the same room to discuss what is needed to develop a biofuels industry in Nicaragua.

Impact

¶15. (U) The proposed activities will advance U.S. objectives by:

- Publicizing the developmental benefits of agricultural biotechnology and biofuels;
- Promoting the free exchange of ideas, based upon science-based presentations, to objectively change hearts and minds;
- Inviting government officials, the private sector, and scientists to discuss a legal framework and policy that is conducive to the development of agricultural biotechnology and a biofuels industry; and
- Helping National Assembly deputies to understand the potential of biotechnology as they deliberate pending biosafety legislation.

Budget

¶16. (U) Estimated costs are as follows:

- \$12,350 - National Biotechnology Conference

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3 Speakers from U.S. - Transportation \$4500
Lodging and M&IE \$1850
1-Day Conference, hall rental, refreshments, and
invitations - \$6000;

- \$29,500 - Outreach to Agricultural Universities

2 Speakers from U.S. - transportation \$3000
2 weeks lodging, MIE \$5800
Five 1-Day Regional Conferences - \$20,000
Local Transportation - \$700; and

- \$16,675 - Biofuel Energy Solutions Seminar

2 Speakers from U.S., transportation \$3000
lodging and MIE \$825
3 Speakers from Region, transportation - \$5000
lodging and MIE - \$1850
1-Day Conference hall rental, etc. - \$6000;

- \$58,525: Total requested for all three activities.

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¶18. (U) These activities complement efforts by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Energy, and State to promote sustainable agricultural production, biotechnology, and biofuels. Members of the country team, including the Economics Section, Public Affairs, Foreign Agricultural Service, and USAID will work together to identify qualified speakers from the United States and the region, and implement proposed activities.

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